

## **The Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project**

Judith Y. Singer, Long Island University- Brooklyn Campus

Alan Singer, Hofstra University

The two, three and four-year-old children cheered for Cabree the goat and his friend Teegra. They squealed with excitement when the six-foot tall tiger puppets fled across the stage. The play was *The Banza*, a Haitian tale. The performers, all dressed up in white shirts and blue pants or skirts, were seventh graders from a local middle school. After performances of *The Banza* (Wolkstein, 1981) and *The Enormous Turnip* (Parkinson, 1987), an Eastern European folk tale, the seventh graders from class 7-71 were paired with children in the four-year-old group called the Rabbits. They sat down at tables, in chairs, or stretched out on the floor, and the teenagers read folk tales from children's books to their young friends.

While Charles read *The Adventures of Connie and Diego* (Garcia, 1992), a Mexican story, four-year-old Jamel sat on his lap. Later, during the fifteen minute walk back to their intermediate school, Charles excitedly said to his teacher, Jennie Chacko, "This was special. They really looked up to us."

Initially, Diamond did not want to visit the preschool program or read with the younger children. When class 7-71 discussed the idea, he strenuously objected, claiming, "The books we read are for kids." He wanted to know, "Is this a special ed class?" In the end, however, he agreed to be a narrator in *The Banza*, and on the way back to school his misgivings forgotten, he told Ms. Chacko, "The little boy I read to was so excited he just wanted to hold the book."

Monique, who read a Bantu folk tale called *The Name of the Tree* (Lottridge, 1990) with Tiffany and Tricia, asked if the Rabbits could visit their school next time. Other students picked up on her request and their teachers agreed to invite them.

The Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project is a partnership between the Morris L. Eisenstein Learning Center in East New York, Brooklyn, its sponsoring agency, the United Community Centers, and Intermediate School 292 in New York City's Community School District 19. Its most important partners are the thirteen and fourteen-year-olds in class 7-71 and the four-year-olds at the Learning Center. Together, maybe, these young people can build a new, multicultural, more literate, caring world.

Intermediate School 292 and the Learning Center share a long term commitment to multicultural education. Both programs integrate the lives and cultures of their diverse student populations into curriculum and encourage teachers to examine

global issues with their classes (Singer, J., 1991; Singer, J. and Singer, A., 1997; Singer, J., 1998). The walls in both buildings are covered with multicultural posters. The classrooms at the Learning Center were decorated with murals announcing that "UNICEF Helps Children Around the World" and "UNICEF is Children Helping Children." One group had created a bright mosaic collage from construction paper and magazine cutouts of the things children need to live. As they waited for the middle school students to begin, the younger children and their teachers sang "The More We Get Together" and "There are Many, Many Children All Around the World." For props, the students from I. S. 292 used masks created by the previous year's sixth graders as part of their own "coming of age" ceremonies (Singer A., Gurton, Horowitz, Hunte, Broomfield, and Thomas, 1998).

Promoting literacy in this inner-city, Brooklyn community continues to be a major challenge. According to Theodora Ridley, director of the day care center, "We all believe that multicultural education is necessary, but we also know it is just not enough. It is at the center of our curriculum. But unless we build on it, go beyond it, the children are not getting what they need to survive and thrive in a very difficult world. We wanted the middle school students to read with the day care children to encourage their curiosity about the world and to prepare them to read." For middle school teachers, a constant problem is finding reading material that interests students and challenges them, but is not perceived of as either "babyish" and demeaning, or "boring." The latter usually means that the material is either distant from their life experiences or technically too difficult for them to decipher and comprehend.

Part of the strength of the Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project is that it speaks to the needs of two groups of learners at the same time. It exposes both groups to interesting, accessible, multicultural children's literature. While the younger children are provided with role models of older children who like to read stories, the older children feel encouraged when they realize that they can be role models. The middle school students also have the opportunity to read literature they can successfully navigate without feeling stigmatized as slow readers.

The demographic profiles of both schools underscore the educational challenges facing inner-city schools and communities. At I.S. 292, 98 percent of the children are "Black" or "Hispanic," 22 percent attend some form of special education, 14 percent have limited English proficiency, and 93 percent are eligible for free lunch (New York City Board of Education, 1997). On standardized New York State reading tests administered in May, 1997, only 30 percent of the sixth graders achieved passing

scores, and the eighth graders scored significantly below city and state averages. The Learning Center's children, who live in the same community, could be their younger siblings. In order to qualify for city-funded day care, most of their parents and caretakers work at low-income jobs, are enrolled in workfare programs, or are foster care providers (Singer, J., 1998).

These children need the best prepared teachers, but as in most inner city schools in the United States, the teachers often are underprepared (Schwartz, 1996; NCT & AF, 1996). Only 56 percent of the teachers at I.S. 292 are fully licensed and permanently assigned to the building. At the Learning Center, most classrooms are headed by uncertified teachers. Once teachers earn state certification, they usually move on to higher paying jobs in public elementary schools.

The leadership at both schools has grappled with these challenges by developing relationships with outside organizations. I.S. 292 participates in a reading and writing program developed by John Hopkins University and it recently secured a staff development grant from the Asia Society. The school recruits student teachers and participant/observers from Schools of Education, and it has partnerships with local youth and health programs. During the last decade, the Learning Center and the United Community Centers have received government, corporate and foundation grants that allowed them to offer AIDS prevention, ESL, citizenship, and parenting classes, develop community art and gardening projects, and work with youth. The Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project is part of their outreach efforts. It is supported by educators from Long Island and Hofstra Universities who have helped them combine literacy activities used to teach Learning Center staff and parents how to read to children with the idea of citizenship education for secondary school students.

At I.S. 292, students were introduced to the Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project during a discussion where they were asked to define multicultural, literacy and citizenship. Outside observers might look at class 7-71 and see a room full of black and brown faces. But the seventh graders quickly identified their cultural similarities and differences. They all live in East New York, Brooklyn, and they each speak either English or English and Spanish. They also have relatives from many different parts of the world, including the U.S. South, South and Central America, the United Kingdom, and Jamaica, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti in the Caribbean.

While defining multicultural was not hard for these students, understanding the relationship between citizenship and the literacy project was a problem. Most of the

students were native-born citizens of the United States. They all could identify themselves as citizens of I.S. 292 and class 7-771. But for them, citizenship means membership and obeying rules. The idea of taking responsibility for others was something they reserved for their families. Some of the students initially insisted that "we should be paid to volunteer." However, they each eventually decided that they were willing to volunteer "to do something important" and one hundred percent of the class returned signed permission slips allowing them to visit the preschool program.

The students in class 7-71 know that they do not perform very well in school, so what they had the greatest difficulty understanding was why their class was being asked to participate in the project. When they found out that their job as literacy volunteers was to help young children in a local day care center learn to read, their collective reaction was, "Why are you asking us?" The answers they arrived at through discussion were that "this is something we can do well," "the young children need our help," and "practicing reading and writing can help us, too."

To prepare for their role as Multicultural Literacy volunteers, I.S. 292 students studied international folk tales as part of the global studies curriculum in Jennie Chacko's interdisciplinary social studies and language arts class. They also practiced reading aloud to each other in Michael Maiglow's reading class. Chacko, Maiglow, and the Learning Center staff selected *The Banza* and *The Enormous Turnip* for presentation as plays because these books introduce students to other cultures and present themes like "working together" and "confronting fears" that can be discussed in both preschool and intermediate school classrooms. After the middle school students read and discussed these stories, they worked in groups to rewrite them as plays and puppet shows. The different versions of the plays were combined, students divided up the parts, and rehearsals began. To jazz up the production, they decided to use painted plastic masks and giant puppets made by sixth graders the year before.

While still in its pilot stage, the Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project already supports many important educational goals. It builds on and extends existing institutional commitments to multicultural curriculum. It encourages student interest in understanding the culturally diverse nature of our world and uses their interest to stimulate literacy. In addition, working as literacy volunteers with young children promotes an interest in reading and writing among middle school students, while the relationship with the older students increases the desire of the younger children to learn to read and write.

Mel Grizer, executive director of the United Community Centers articulated an unanticipated and significant benefit of the project. "It frees the middle school students from having to act the role of tough teenagers who resist school and adults. When they work with the little kids they don't have to be so tough and the barriers to learning come down. You can see the change on their faces. They also get a chance to give back to the community. They learn how to earn respect in a whole new way."

## **References**

- Garcia, M. (1992). *The adventures of Connie and Diego*. Danbury, CT: Children's Press
- Lottridge, C. (1990). *The name of the tree*. Old Tappan, NJ: Simon & Schuster Children's.
- NCT&AF (1996). *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*. New York: National Commission on Teaching & America's Future.
- New York City Board of Education (1997). 1996-1997 Annual School Report, District 19 Margaret S. Douglas School I.S. 292. New York: New York City Board of Education.
- Parkinson, K. (1987). *The enormous turnip*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.
- Schwartz, F. (1996). "Why Many New Teachers Are Unprepared to Teach in Most New York City Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan*. 78(1).
- Singer, J (1991). Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF. *Democracy and education*. 6(1).
- Singer, J. and Singer. A. (1997). "'Festivals of light' a multicultural celebration in Brooklyn". *Social studies & the young learner*. 10(2).
- Singer, J. (1998). *Fighting for a better world: Teaching in an inner-city day care center*. 9832768. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI.
- Wolkstein, D. (1981). *The banza*. New York: Dial books for young readers.

## **The Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project**

Judith Y. Singer, Assistant Professor  
Long Island University-Brooklyn Campus

Alan Singer, Associate Professor,  
Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York

Len Davidman  
University Center for Teacher Education  
California Polytechnic State University  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407

Dear colleague,

Please consider this article for the "Creating Multicultural Classrooms" section in Multicultural Perspectives. Thank you.

Judith Y. Singer  
557 8th St. 2L  
Brooklyn, NY 11215  
Phone 718/768-7239

Alan Singer  
Phone 516/463-5853 Fax 516/463-6503  
e-mail [CATAJS@Hofstra.edu](mailto:CATAJS@Hofstra.edu)

The Multicultural Literacy and Citizenship Project is the result of a partnership between the Morris L. Eisenstein Learning Center, its sponsoring agency, the United Community Centers, and I.S. 292 in Brooklyn, New York's Community School District 19. It is supported by teacher preparation programs at two local universities, Long Island University and Hofstra University. But its most important participants are the thirteen and fourteen year olds in class 7-71 and the four-year-olds from the Learning Center's Rabbits. Together, maybe, they can build a new, multicultural, more literate, caring world.

The little children gathered in the community room sing, Many Many children aoround the world.

Jennie Chacko and Michael Maiglow are first year teachers at IS 292. Support from Hofstra New Teachers Network.

Theodora echoes sentiments expressed by many educators and academics who have struggled for decades to enhance multicultural education programs and insure that children from diverse backgrounds see themselves in the books, activities, history, and cultures studied in school. Sonia Nieto calls this..... To go beyond multiculturalism, Theodora's program is working with a local intermediate school to build on their shared commitment to multiculturalism and student interest to promote literacy and responsible citizenship.

Community School District 19, Intermediate School 292, and the MLE Learning Center in the East New York section of Brooklyn in New York City have long term commitments to multicultural education. But despite continuing success in developing multicultural curriculum and projects, promoting literacy in the inner-city East New York community continues to be a significant problem. Demographics of an inner city school. School performance. According to the school profile, 97.6% of the children at 292 are either "Black" or "Hispanic". 21.9 are receive special education. 13.7 Limited English proficeincy. 92.8 of the students are eligible for free lunch. Among last years sixth graders, only 30.2 acheived the minimum state score. Eighth graders score better by still significantly below city and state averages. Disproportionate number of graduates enter vocational programs. 36.6% which is three times city rate.

Only 56% of the teachers are fully licensed and permanently assigned to the school compared to 77.8% in New York City overall. Trail in other essential categories as well. Only 58.7% more than five years of teaching compared to 70% citiwide and 74.8% have at least a masters degree, compared to 88.5% citiwide. Despite conditions, administrative and teacher leadership. Secured Teach Asia grant, particape in Success for All Roots and Wings, a structured reading a writing program developed by John Hopkins University, and partnerships with local youth and health programs and Hofstra University.

After the performances students interviewed each other to reflect on multiculturalism, literacy and citizenship.

Banza, The Giant Turnip

Disproportionate number of graduates enter vocational programs. 36.6% which is three times city rate.

compared to 77.8% in New York City overall. Trail in other essential categories as well. Only 58.7% more than five years of teaching compared to 70% citiwide and 74.8% have at least a masters degree, compared to 88.5% citiwide.

The students are under tremendous pressure to improve their scores on standardized reading scores, so they were also very familiar with the concept of literacy. Particpate in intensive SFA program daily. While scores have improved, still trails.

This program is designed to motivate junior high school students to improve their reading and writing skills by building on their interest in multicultural activities and involving them as literacy mentors for 2 to 5 year old children at a local day care center. In this project, multicultural education that explores the entire world is integrated into the curriculum and becomes a force for promoting literacy.

Success for All is a reading program from John Hopkins University. Highly structured. Tries to connect a story with student's' background in order to provide a purpose for reading

During discussion of the projecyt and the reading program, an overage seventh grader demanded to know, "Is this a special ed class? The books we read are for kids."

The students at IS 292 will read and discuss the multicultural stories, write scripts for plays, create giant puppets, costumes and backdrops, learn their parts, and perform for the children.